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50 Years: Flying High In A Man's World

Women Left Mark On Nasa Research

November 08, 1992 | By KIRK SAVILLE Daily Press

NEWPORT NEWS — She was one of the first female engineers at what is now known as NASA, working to make early airplanes safe and reliable.

Years later, she helped the agency make the switch from slide rules to supercomputers. But Vera Huckel doesn't think of herself as a pioneer in aeronautics - or women's rights.

"I guess I'm just peculiar. I never think about things like that," said Huckel, 84. "It was just a job I enjoyed.

Today is the 50th anniversary of an announcement by NASA's forerunner, the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, that the agency would hire women to do "vital war work," jobs formerly held only by men.

The agency's female workforce grew from fewer than 100 before World War II to more than 1,000 - nearly one-third of the staff - after the war, according to "Engineer in Charge," a history of Langley written by Jim Hansen.

"They were solicited because of the shortage of men," said Beverly Golemba, a St. Leo College sociology professor who is working on a book detailing the history of women at NACA. Another reason was cost. NACA officials "immediately recognized that they could hire women cheaper than men," Golemba said.

When Huckel was hired for \$1,440 a year, a man with the same background started at about \$2,000 a year. Huckel, who lives in Newport News, retired from NASA in 1972, after more than 33 years at Langley, first with NACA and then with NASA.

She was already at NACA when the war started, and she watched as more women workers came to Langley. Huckel graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1929 with a degree in math. She lived in California for 10 years, then came to Virginia to visit a friend.

"I had never even heard of NACA," Huckel said. When her friend went to Langley's personnel office, Huckel went along.

"They said, 'Are you interested?,' I said, 'No,' but I interviewed anyway."

Huckel decided to accept a job offer as a "junior computer," doing calculations for researchers.

"They would give you a problem and tell you to solve it," Huckel said.

The computers, usually women, were hired to do the time-consuming calculations in the days before electronic computers.

Huckel worked on problems relating to theories or aerodynamics. Others worked on data from wind tunnels.

The women were referred to as "girls," a term Huckel still uses when talking about her years at Langley. She is modest when describing her career, listing her accomplishments in a matter-of-fact manner.

"I'm not a person that says, 'I'm great. I did such and such.'"

In the late 1940s, Huckel wrote her first technical paper. At the time, it was exceedingly rare for a woman to write NACA papers. By the time she retired, Huckel had written or co-authored more than 20 papers.

After she started writing technical papers, Huckel was given the title of engineer, becoming one of the first women at NACA to hold that title. Later, she became supervisor of a computer pool.